
HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD STAFF REPORT AND RECOMMENDATION

Landmark/District:	Jessie Reno School Restoration and Addition	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Agenda
Address:	4815 Howard Street, NW	<input type="checkbox"/> Consent Calendar
Meeting Date:	November 17, 2011	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Alteration
Case Number:	11-401	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Addition
Staff Reviewer:	Andrew Lewis	<input type="checkbox"/> Demolition
		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Conceptual Design

The District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) proposes to restore and rehabilitate the historic Jesse Reno School (Reno School) and to construct an addition on the rear to provide approximately 12,900 sq. ft. of rehabilitated space in the historic building and 24,600 sq. ft. of new space in the planned addition. The project will also provide a direct link between the Reno School and the adjacent Alice Deal Middle School (Alice Deal) so that both facilities can address the recent and expected increases in student enrollment as one integrated campus. The majority of the rehabilitated and newly constructed space will be used for classroom purposes, but administrative functions, common areas and a day care facility will also be provided.

Reno School

The two-story vernacular Reno School was designed by Washington DC's first Municipal Architect, Snowden Ashford, and constructed in 1903. Its purpose was to serve students from the predominately African-American neighborhood known as Reno City that once stood near the present day school. Beginning in the mid-1930s, Reno City was systematically demolished over a period of years to make way for an expanded reservoir and other improvements. Reno School remains among the few structures directly associated with the former neighborhood. In fact, the school continued to serve its original purposes until it was closed in 1950.

After closure, Reno School was used for a variety of functions, including a Civil Defense Office and a special needs facility for Alice Deal, but the building has been uninhabited since the 1990s. Throughout this timespan, the historic school was been altered to some degree or another by ongoing adaptations and it has some significantly deteriorated areas resulting from water damage and a general lack of maintenance but the building retains a high degree of integrity and is structurally sound. Reno School was recently listed in the DC Inventory of Historic Sites and the National Register of Historic Places.

Restoration and Alteration

Alterations will obviously be required to adapt Reno School to meet current codes and programming goals as well as to connect the building to the new addition, but an extensive evaluation was conducted at the onset of project planning to develop a preservation strategy

that would help determined the appropriate level and type of alteration for all areas of the historic school. As a result, the proposed revisions are relatively minor and primarily limited to the conversion of the first floor cloak rooms into utility and restroom spaces; the introduction of a central skylight to allow natural light to enter the main hallway; and the modification of the small original library and one rear window to provide a connection between the historic building and the new addition. Two additional windows will also be enclosed within the connection, but both will remain intact.

Alterations proposed for the secondary and less ornate basement level include removing some original walls to create one large space for flexible programming and subdividing other basement areas to accommodate a wider variety of functions. Additional light will also be provided by introducing seven small new window wells and lowering the sills of the existing windows so that larger windows can be installed.

All of these alterations will be offset by preservation, restoration, and reconstruction of the majority of the building's original fabric. On the exterior, the existing asphalt shingle roof will be replaced with standing seam metal and the original vent stacks will be retained in place. The "pebbledash" and brick façades, projecting pediments and entry elements, 6/6 double-hung windows, metal cornice and trim will be fully repaired, replaced in-kind, or restored. The once grand front portico, original ornamental fence and entry stair will be reconstructed based upon original plans and historical photographs. The flag pole shown atop the building in historical photographs will also be replaced.

On the interior, the main hall and its "pinwheel" layout will be preserved, repaired and restored along with the two original stairways and the four original classroom spaces. The exposed structural system in the classrooms will also remain intact and as much trim and as many doors as possible will be retained or replaced in-kind.

It is also important to note that historical information about Reno School, Reno City and Alice Deal School will be displayed in the common areas of Reno School and the new addition.

Proposed Addition

The earliest project concepts proposed a connection on Reno's southern façade since that side had served as the primary entrance for Alice Deal's special needs facility in the 1980s-1990s. However, the concept was revised to respond to the fact that Reno's western façade is the only one lacking a pediment and an entrance door and is, therefore, the "rear" of the building.

With this orienting factor established, a glass "hyphen" on Reno's western façade was proposed to serve as a bridge between the new addition and the historic school. The connection to Alice Deal will be situated to the southwest of the Reno School via an existing doorway in the recently constructed gymnasium. This approach, combined with a 20' setback between the new addition and Reno School will ensure that none of the historic building's primary façades will be obscured by new construction.

By being enclosed in glass and attached below the cornice line, the “hyphen” will also minimize interruptions to the character-defining features of Reno’s rear façade. Locating the obligatory elevator in the new connector will also reduce the number of interior alterations required in the historic school. The “hyphen” will also reinforce a strong east-west axis between old and new and provide direct views all the way thorough both buildings to the athletic fields to the west.

As the plans and elevations in the project information packets will illustrate, the new addition itself is fairly large, but remains respectful of the historic school by maintaining a low profile, flat roofs, varied massing, a variety of materials, a considerable amount of glazed surface and the previously noted setback. In short, this combination of design features achieves the very important goal of allowing Reno School to continue to “read” as a free-standing, historic building.

Evaluation

As noted above, the exterior of the Reno School will be fully restored and the reconstruction of its original portico will reestablish a point of entry and restore the historic school’s individual identity. The most significant alterations to the exterior, the introduction of new windows wells and larger windows, will be minimally visible due to their location below grade. Similarly, the visual impact of the proposed skylight on the exterior will be minimal due to a slight change in the pitch of the roof.

The majority of the first floor will also be appropriately restored while the most significant alterations will be limited to secondary spaces such as “cloak rooms.” Although the proposed skylight and hallway to the new hyphen will require considerable changes to first level, both of these alterations will be reversible.

Alterations proposed for the basement are somewhat more extensive, but will involve spaces that have already been altered to a greater degree and fabric that is generally less refined. The amount of alteration in the basement may also change depending upon further refinement of programming needs.

Through a combination of setback, massing, scale and changes in existing grade, the fairly large new addition will be compatible with the historic school and allow it to continue to “read” as a free-standing, important historic building.

Since the project is still at a conceptual level, additional consultation will be required to address a variety of specific preservation treatments and approaches to refine the design of the new addition. Examples for the historic school include investigating the most effective way to restore pebbledash finish, determining the appropriate design for the skylight, identifying approaches that will minimize alterations and maximize the amount of preserved historic fabric. For the new addition, consultation should continue to select the most suitable surface treatments and to revise the new building’s rear façade so that it will create a sense of a unified campus.

The architectural team and agency officials have met directly with representatives of the affected ANC and the Tenleytown Historical Society and both groups have been provided opportunities to review and comment on the evolution of the conceptual design. At the time this staff report was written, all parties are believed to be generally supportive of the project. Additional information will be provided if formal comments are submitted for the Board's consideration.

With regard to archaeology, the proposed site for the new addition has the potential to contain historic and/or prehistoric archaeological resources even though the site appears to have been disturbed to a considerable degree over the years. Geoarchaeological survey will likely be recommended to determine whether intact soils are present in the areas where ground disturbance is proposed.

Although many details about the restoration and new construction remain unresolved, the most notable aspects of this project are that decades of neglect and deterioration will be brought to an end and the historically significant Reno School will be preserved, restored and allowed to continue serving its originally intended purpose. At the same time, the conceptual design is sufficiently developed to allow the new addition to provide much needed space while still respecting the prominence of the historic building.

Recommendation

Staff recommends that the Board approve of the conceptual design for the proposed new addition and delegate the remaining restoration and design review to the staff.